BIBLE—CHURCH—WORLD
KEYNOTE
Union Theological Seminary, June 12, 2000
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Week in and week out, you and I dare to do a peculiar and sometimes brave thing. We stand up before a gathered congregation, read from a very old book and then speak about what we have read, more or less, for twenty minutes or so.

It occurs to me regularly that it is counter-cultural activity. The listeners do not have to be there. It is a small miracle that they are there, given the fact that it is the only day of the week that is their own, and that there are so many other alternatives. I took a Sunday morning off once on a bright clear summer morning, and took a bike ride along the lakefront to a favorite small restaurant which caters to lake-front bikers, joggers and walkers, and enjoyed a western omelette, home fries, coffee and the New York Times sitting in the sun and thought to myself—"This is really nice. This is what people are giving up to go to church and hear me preach? Would I do that?—maybe—maybe on cold, rainy mornings. It taught me an important lesson about taking them and myself and this peculiar act seriously. I commend the experience to you.

It is a small miracle that they are there given the alternatives, given the odd inconvenience of the hour, the determined discomfort of the facilities (where else in the world do they sit on a wooden bench for an hour and have to look for the single rest room?

It was blistering hot yesterday in the Sanctuary of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. The humidity was 100%. It could not have been more uncomfortable. And I wondered again about the peculiar miracle of this experience.

There they are, week after week, if not eagerly waiting for our words, at least still willing to give us a hearing. They no longer have to be there. That is all gone now—the social and economic foundations upon which 300 years of church attending and sermon listening was built in this country, utterly disappeared in a sociological tidal wave so huge we are still trying to figure out what hit us. Post modernity it is sometimes fashionably called and one of its relevant characterizations is that not only don't you have to go to church, not only are the cultural expectations washed away, it is now slightly odd, slightly counter-culture, that you should want to go.

But none of that compares in critical importance to the fact that very few of those who do come to sit and listen, have any idea why it is you and I are reading from this strange book. Willing to give us a hearing, hopeful even of hearing a helpful word from us, perhaps a healing word, a reconciling word, at least an encouraging word, nevertheless, innocent of any notion

whatever of why our word begins with the book, innocent of any notion that we are indulging a fantastic hope up there in that pulpit, namely that our word will contain the Word, that our words about the words of the book will contain something of God's Word to them.

So I begin weekly, and have for years, almost without variation, "Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts to your word." And I pray that prayer before I open the book and read the text, not before I begin to speak, but before I read from the book so as to drop a little hint at the outset that what is about to happen—the reading and the speaking—are one act and that we actually do believe that when they are performed together—when one reads and then interprets and filters through personal experience and considers the complex matrix of relationships and pain and joy and ecstasy and despair and lust and boredom gathered out there on those uncomfortable wooden benches—we actually believe that God can and regularly does use this odd experience to communicate, to speak a word—to all of us—preacher and people. So, Yes; yes indeed. "Startle us, O God with your truth and open our hearts and minds to your word, that hearing we might believe and believing, trust you with our lives, Amen."

So why are they there? We're there because someone is paying us to be there. Oh, to be sure, we experience in some way God's call to be there, although the more I do it the more cautious I am inclined to be about claiming God's seal of approval, and for some, once you get used to doing it, the meaning and purpose of your whole existence gets involved and, of all things, you feel empty and useless when you aren't doing it on Sunday morning, not unlike the race horse which becomes anxious and sweaty when the starting bell goes off and he or she is still in the stall, "homiletical co-dependence; my life has no meaning unless I'm doing it," which I was experiencing yesterday sitting in that dreadful heat listening to a colleague hark at Acts 2.

We are there; Fred Craddock puts it so eloquently, because people actually pay us good American dollars to go to the study every week, to read the Bible, and then to report back on Sunday morning.

But why are they there when they so obviously don't have to be? They are there, it is my experience, because they are hungry and the rest of their diet is not satisfying them. They are there because they need something—assurance, community, forgiveness, excitement, inspiration, challenge, and —incredibly—they have decided that what you and I say just might help.

On occasion I like to remind myself of how peculiar it is that I am there and they are there and how important. Every now and then I submit myself to the discipline of reading and listening to what the world thinks about this enterprise. It is not always pleasant.

In Evan Connell's novel, *Mr. Bridge,* written in 1969—and thus a kind of early report on the post-modern tidal wave that has washed over us—there

are references to religion, church and ministers, that make me cringe, but which are edifying if we can overcome our defensiveness.

It is Kansas City—and not Chicago and certainly not New York City. The sermon may be a carefully constructed oration . . . it may consist mostly of stories or mostly of word studies, it may draw deeply from the experience of the preacher or the theological tradition, but unless it is an interpretation of the text or texts that the congregation has just heard read aloud, it is not preaching." (insert from book)

The novel, and its companion, *Mrs. Bridge,* consist of short vignettes and the last one, the book's conclusion, should be must reading for those of us who reach. It's title is "Joy to the World." (Book insert)

In his recent book, *Between the Bible and the Church,* Yale's David Bartlett begins with a classic definition. "Right preaching is the interpretation of Scripture . . . preachers entertain, inform, inspire and opine. Often these presentations help the faithful and edify the community, but they are not preaching. They are not what every congregation has a right to expect when its members wait for the preacher to preach. The sermon may be a carefully constructed oration . . . it may consist mostly of stories or mostly of word studies, it may draw deeply from the experience of the preacher or the theological tradition, but unless it is an interpretation of the text or texts that the congregation has just heard read aloud, it is not preaching."

That, of course, is not all preaching is. In fact, I would submit that if it is not also in some way an interpretation of the world, an exegesis of those very people out there and the world in which they live, neither is it preaching.

Bartlett is unapologetic about his Barthianism. Karl Barth said: "Scriptural exegesis rests on the assumption that the message scripture has to give us, even in its most debateable and least assimilable parts, is in all circumstances truer and more important than the best and most necessary things that we ourselves have said or can say."

Bartlett takes that to mean that Leviticus 24: 5-9—which is a recipe for baking the bread for the tabernacle and instructions on how to arrange the loaves on the table—is more true and more important than Augustine's *Confessions* or Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* or Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle.*

I couldn't figure out whether Bartlett agreed with that but I don't think I do. Barth's son, Markus, who was my New Testament professor, taught me that the best way to study a text was not with a commentary but a dictionary—discover what the words mean in themselves—he said. Forget about everything but the words—and I have found that helpful and commentaries less helpful. But because he was his father's son, he couldn't let it go at that. If you can't find the Word of God in the text, don't blame the text, he said. "Keep looking because it's in there." And

that has not always been helpful and I'm not sure I agree with him either. But it has served as a reminder over the years of the basic assumptions behind this act—that it is not a lecture, not my opinion on this and that regardless of how deeply I feel them, not instruction in history—it may be all of that, but if it is not in some way an outgrowth of my encounter with scripture, it will not convey anything of God's word. I do believe that.

And I do adhere to a fairly consistent regimen which begins six months ahead of time, with a focused reading of the texts the lectionary assigns to each Sunday, an attempt to paraphrase each one of them, and when that is complete, a review of my paraphrases to discern big movements, big themes, and then a decision about which text or texts will be the basis for a sermon each week. I place that information on a page in a three-ring binder notebook for each Sunday and in the months ahead material will accumulate on each page as I read and live my life. And then on Monday morning I dig in and do the Markus Barth exercise with an English dictionary and assure that I understand the words and yes, I do look at commentaries—*Texts for Preaching* is helpful, *Interpretation,* journals. [By the way, starting this summer, the *Christian Century* will publish a brief essay, "Living by the Word,' for every Sunday of the year, based on the Lectionary; when the Century is published bi-weekly, which happens 16 times a year, each issue will contain two lectionary essays. So, do pick up your subscription blank and send a few to your parish leaders.]

I do that study early in the morning on Monday and Tuesday and it does start things rolling and if I have accumulated literary references or news articles on that week's page, I'll look at them and track down other literary trails that have now emerged for me and write it all down until I have an abundance of raw material, lots more than I can use. I do that early Wednesday morning and by bedtime ___to have it distilled and reformed into the one or two or three things I now believe God is saying to me and my people and on Thursday morning I write it in a place where I cannot be interrupted and by Thursday noon it is done—except for editing and cutting and adding and fussing which goes on right up to the minute it is preached. And at noon on Sunday I try to forget about preaching for about 18 hours and then I start again on Monday morning.

The challenge, of course, is that most of the people who will hear, do not know why it is you are spending all that time with scripture. On the one hand, the most hurtful thing people say about us and have said about me is, "You don't preach the Bible—I'm going to Moody or Christ Church or St. John's—they preach the Bible there." What I've learned, of course, is what they're really saying is not really that you're not preaching the Bible—it's all that other stuff—the stuff, by the way, that makes it preaching, by my lights—the stuff about life, the life of the world in which we live, their lives, our lives actually lived in the world—which after all is what the Bible is about. So I now believe that when someone says, "Your preaching is not biblical enough, I conclude that the real problem is that it is too biblical.

In any event, God save us from living out our vocation on the basis of what people say in those fragile, vulnerable minutes after the service when they file by and say, "Great sermon, Reverend." How we love that—but God keep us from needing it, depending on it, pandering to it.

A chastening experience for me was a visit to a large and distinguished church in the South. I had been invited to preach at the installation of a former colleague and my good friend as an Associate Pastor. For reasons of her own, she asked me to preach on the Hagar and Ishmael story in Genesis 21—which I did, as faithfully as I could. It's a hard story: one of Phylis Tribble's *Texts of Terror.* It's about marginalized people, of course, about God's own people marginalizing unwanted people, disposable people, women and children as disposable people. It's about God reclaiming those who have been excluded. So afterward I was shaking hands with the people. Now, this Yankee is easy when it comes to Southern graciousness; you know, that genuine sweet hospitality that makes you think you really are something. I love it. So at the very end of the line, a woman of obvious culture and means took my hand in both of hers and looked me in the eye and said, in a gorgeous draw, with 200 years of sweetness in her voice: "Dr. Buchanan, it was so nice of you to come all the way down here from Chicago to be with us on this lovely day. You are a dear," and I'm feeling pretty good at this point, and she says, "I just wanted you to know that I hated your sermon."

It hurts to be told that you are not preaching Bible when you most certainly are. But a much more serious challenge is that most of those folk out there don't know why we are even trying to do it.

It is rampant Biblical illiteracy, of course. They don't know the names of the players anymore. Someone used to have fun with the preacher's melodramatic overuse of esoteria—the Amorites and Jebusites. But some of your folk don't know who Peter and James and John were; don't know, some of them, what Old and New Testament means. They don't plug in at the mere mention of "Good Samaritan" or "Prodigal" or Loaves and Fishes. You cannot preach without reference to Exodus and Exile, but don't for a moment assume that anyone knows what historical realities those words connote, not to mention the mythic and theological conclusions the church has drawn.

It is not getting better. It is not going to get better. Ambitious adult education will help and maybe that is the best we can hope for—a small but sturdy cadre of students and learners—who will become teachers and the keepers of the stories and the tradition until we figure it out. But in the meantime your preaching and mine must be at least part teaching or it will be a waste of words.

Where is the authority of the Bible, after all? If it is not in the words themselves—the fundamentalist position—where is it? The words of Jesus? The Ten Commandments? Does an internal contradiction abrogate authority? Does history have anything to do with it? If Paul says it but

Jesus doesn't, does it matter? And what about slavery? What about women? What about divorce? What about homosexuality?

Howard Thurman remembered his own grandmother: (book insert)

I'm not enough of a scholar to have an answer, but I know what the question is and for preachers in mainline churches, it is the authority question. I heard Martin Marty say that historically it takes the church 200 to 250 years to resolve big issues: incarnation, trinity, reformation. Our issues, Marty says, are Sex and Authority, and the fact that while we've been arguing for 30 years and it seems like forever, we are going to be at it for a long, long time, is both depressing and comforting. In the meantime, the act of interpreting and preaching, it seems to me is, itself, a witness about the authority of Scripture.

How, Peter Gomes asked recently, to make the connections: "What is the connection between Bibleland, that ancient world into which we are invited week after week, and the good news that is supposed to have something to do with the way I live my life here and now?"

Gomes remembers his childhood in the First Baptist Church of Plymouth, Massachusetts, where the preacher, an enthusiastic fundamentalist from Wheaton College, a Wheaton College graduate, installed a sign out front that said, "Preaching from the Bible the Pilgrims Brought," and how later he discovered that it wasn't true. The minister was preaching from the King James Version but the Pilgrims used the Geneva Bible. In fact, the Pilgrims had very little confidence in the new modern version which had been authorized by King James.

In a provocative and helpful essay, Gomes proposed that while we intend to proclaim Gospel, we end up expounding the Bible and that they are not the same. The hermanectical(?)rubric he proposes is "to preach the gospel Jesus preached." And, essentially, to use the lens of Christology to look at the rest of scripture. That, of course, is pretty standard, but Gomes is convinced we don't do it much. Ed Farley asked it earlier: "How is it, in our effort to preach the Bible, we seem to have lost the gospel? What is the relationship between Bible text and the good news?" (See *The Risk of the Good News: From Text to Gospel)*

"Can we hear what Jesus preached?" Gomes asks "and can we appropriate it in our own proclamations and in our own way?"

If we did that we would reclaim a gospel that faces the future, not the past, a gospel radically grounded in the real world, a gospel that is about transformation, a gospel that is radically inclusive.

Gomes says, "There is no way to miss the fact that Jesus' teaching and life was deeply rooted in the world—that it was about transformation and the future—that people were healed, restored and then sent into the future as responsible new men and women, and that it was radically inclusive, meant

to destroy all exclusive categories and to be as inclusive of all those previously and hitherto excluded, marginalized, humiliated or reduced to objects of charity and derision."

The gospel, not the Bible, condemns slavery, Gomes points out. The gospel, not the Bible, pressed for the liberation of women. And that gospel will, ultimately open the church to all God's children, even God's homosexual children, as the gospel is already doing that in the world.

I love the way Annie Dillard talks about the Bible:

"The Bible, this ubiquitous, persistent black chunk of a best-seller, is a chink—often the only chink—through which winds howl. It is a singularity, a black hole into which our rich and multiple world strays and vanishes. WE crack open our pages at our peril. Respectable parents who love their children leave this absolutely respectable book lying about, as a possible safeguard against, say, drugs; alas, it is the book that kidnaps children, and hooks them." (*Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament,* Edited by Alfred Corn, Viking, New York, 1990, p. 26-27)

I had a conversation with a recent graduate of one of our seminaries, an exceptionally bright young woman. Her family had sided with the PCA, a small denomination of very conservative and mostly fundamentalist Presbyterians, who could not go along with the ordination of women. She was grateful, she said, because the PCA made her take scripture seriously and turned her into a student of the Bible. And then, just as Annie Dillard predicted, her study and understanding of scripture made her increasingly uncomfortable with her church's position on ordination and other issues. Scripture nurtured in her a spiritual and intellectual inquiry no longer at home with the confines of the old structure.

What is it that the preacher needs from the academy? Well, good scholarship for one thing. If you have been doing it for as long as I have and have tried to at least stay in touch with what is happening in the rarefied world of Biblical scholarship, you began with historical criticism, moved to literary criticism, heard a lot about narrative, and the fervent admonition to forget everything you learned and just tell the story. But you don't really understand the parable of the Good Samaritan until you know something about how deeply Jews loathed Samaritans and a reasonable person hearing that will ask why and you're into historical criticism and, it's necessary and healthy and good. So bring it on. But also, help us with the connections. Help us, encourage us to live our lives radically and fully in the world and therefore to know who it is who is sitting out there on Sunday morning and why they are there. Make us read —show us how Exodus and Exile keep happening; show us death and resurrection in our world; show us Biblical redemption and salvation in our lives. Help us exegete our people and help us make critical connections between the good news to which the Bible points and the life they are living.

In 36 years of preaching, you circle past each lectionary evolution 12 times. This year Lent began with Mark—and I decided to do something I hadn't done before—preach through the book—and I was captivated by the power and energy, the economy of the writing, the attention to detail and character and the themes that emerge—conflict, insiders becoming outsiders, outsiders becoming insiders, the power of Jesus over everything that diminishes and restricts human life, the restoration to full life of all sorts of dead and dying people, the inclusivity of his love which defies convention, custom, common morality and even religious law to draw into the circle of his love, the outsider, the rejected.

As Easter approached, I noted again, with amusement, the wonderful way Mark ends, at least the oldest manuscripts, abruptly, with verse 8. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go to the tomb to anoint the body, worry about the heavy stone, discover the tomb empty, confront a young man in a white robe who tells them to go to Galilee—that the risen Christ will go ahead of them and then the perfectly wonderful statement: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

It doesn't really make it in the lectionary. It's an alternative reading for year B, but the lectionary planners have a definite preference for Mary and Jesus in the garden according to John—a "preacher friendly" text if there ever was one.

I like Mark a lot. I like it because of its rough authenticity. If someone were making this stuff up, they'd do a better job of finishing it out smoothly. I like it because, as Gomes observes, "Gospel is about tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, about living faithfully and bravely whatever happens in the future."

And I decided to go with it because in the congregation I serve there are/were three wonderful people—three dear friends, dying of cancer—three officers dying too soon—facing a frightening future.

Mary, a Deacon, an Executive with AT&T, married, mother of Olivia, who she traveled to Romania ten years ago to adopt—funny, irreverent, and who said it—"John, I'm so afraid."

Dick, an Elder, engineer, my age, straight as a ram rod, life long Presbyterian who met an ex-nun late in life and married her, an usher—with advanced Esophageal cancer, who loves his church so much that he somehow got it together and helped serve communion on Maundy Thursday—I visited him yesterday. He will die soon, perhaps today.

Kathy, lawyer, mother of two, Trustee, social advocate, passionate about justice and life and her husband and sons. Breast cancer—metastasized—still coming to church during Lent with her wig and emaciated body.

The three of them sitting out there on Easter Sunday.

Gomes says the gospel is always future oriented and for all of us that is a metaphor for mortality: for Mary, Dick and Kathy, sooner—Kathy's funeral was a week ago, last Monday morning.

In any event, the Bible became Gospel.

It's almost as if Mark anticipates all the scientific controversy generated by the proposal that a dead man came back to life—shrouds and carbon dating and theories about post-death resuscitation occurrences; almost as if this ancient writer anticipates the way culture will take this event and because it doesn't know what to do with it, to make it consumer friendly, mix it all up with pagan fertility symbols, eggs and quick breeding rabbits, and emerging life in the newly fertile earth and flowers – and come up with a lovely, if bizarre, festival of spring. It's almost as if Mark knows where the human race will go with this and so says – it's not about bunnies and chickens and eggs and candy and flowers--as lovely as they are. It's about the reality of death and then a greater reality – the power of the love of God that brings life out of death. It's not about an empty tomb – which, appropriately sends the only ones brave enough to peer in, scurrying in terror. It's about love and life. He is not here – he is going ahead of you to Galilee. It's about the future.

The future is where Christ promises to meet us. The future—of the world—the church—our future—is what the Bible is about. And yet, if we are honest, the future is always at least a mixed prospect. Somewhere out there trouble looms, big trouble. Somewhere out there are losses, diminishment, mortality, endings.

- **"Death," the distinguished Catholic theologian Karl Rahner said, "is the absurd arch-contradiction of existence."**
- **"I do not approve" Dorothy Parker said.**
- **"Do not go gently," Dylan Thomas said.**
- **"Life's a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more." William Shakespeare said.**
- **"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." "There is nothing new under the sun," the preacher in Ecclesiastes says.**
- **"I don't want to achieve immortality through my art. I want to achieve it by not dying." Woody Allen says.**
- **"Of course, everybody has to die," William Saroyan said, "but I thought an exception would be made in my case."**

Have you noticed? People you love die. The great Requiem Masses – Mozart, Faure, Durufle—become more and more personal and poignant as the years go by.

"Grant them rest eternal and light perpetual shine on them forever" evoke tears because there are a lot of them now."

When his mother died the late Henri Nouwen wrote to his father asking how the "Easter story speaks to you now that you know so well what it means to lose the one you loved most." (*A Letter of Consolation*, p. 90).

Nouwen is not trivial with his father's grief. It is not appropriate to say that "everything will be all right." Everything is not all right. Not at all. To trivialize death is to trivialize life.

So what he did was remind his father of the story of Easter: reminded him that no one expected anything other than death, no one expected anything but death to have the last word. (Ibid p. 90)

And then, not long before his own untimely death, Nouwen wrote:

"The resurrection is God's way of revealing to us that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. What belongs to God will never get lost.... The resurrection doesn't answer any of our common questions about life after death such as 'How will it be? How will it look?' But it does reveal to us that love is stronger than death. God's love for us, our love for each other, and our love for those who lived before and who will live after us is not just a quickly passing experience, but a reality transcending all time and space." (*Our Greatest Gift, A Meditation on Dying and Caring,* p.109)"

I love the story Nouwen shares with his readers about The Flying Rodleighs, German trapeze artists he greatly admired – so much so that he befriended them, attended practice, even traveled with them. "What's it like?" He asked once and the leader, the flyer said, "I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I'm the star – but the real star is Joe, my catcher. How does that work?" Nouwen asked. "The secret,"Rodleigh said, "is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything...You do nothing?" Rodleigh responded, "The worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher ... the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that the catcher will be there for him."

Nouwen reflects: "the words of Jesus flashed through my mind. 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Dying is trusting in the catcher. Don't be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. He will be there when you make your long jump.
Don't try to grab him; he will grab you. Just stretch out your arms and trust, trust, trust." (p. 66-67)

"He is going ahead of you – there – Galilee – your life – your future – even your death – you will see him, just as he told you."

The preacher worries about this one, do we not? So many people. So much expectation. So much at stake. The one word that must be said – "He is risen," cannot be explained, rationalized, only confessed, sung, prayed, affirmed best by poet, musician, artist. And so we commiserate with one another and comb the old texts for a new angle, and the magazines and essays and journals for a new way to say it. In one of them that we read

"*Journal for Preachers*" the lead essay this year was by Walter Brueggemann. About this exercise in which you and I engage, he wrote:

> **"Happily Easter is not generated by the preacher. It rather is the signature – miracle of the Creator – the one who brings light out of the darkness. The miracle of Easter does not come from the preacher: it comes to the preacher who need only tell the truth of new life that comes precisely in our darkness."**

And so it did as it always does. In life and work it happens, quietly, unmistakably; in some unexpected gesture of heroism or caring or love or hope; some clear sign that life and love have the last word, not death.

It is our great privilege that people come to hear the word we will speak. A word which God uses to transform lives, to bring light in the darkness, to open new futures.

So, yes, "Startle us, O God with your truth and open us to your word, in Jesus Christ, our Lord."
Amen.